

House Committee on Higher Education Request for Information on COVID-19

1. How are institutions of higher education ensuring the health and safety of students, faculty and staff during the 2020 Fall Semester? When applicable, please speak directly to classroom and lab settings, dormitories and dining halls.

The University of Texas Health Science Center at Tyler (UTHSCT) has taken careful precautions to protect the health and safety of students, faculty, staff, and patients since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and will continue to do so as long as necessary. Such precautions include entry screenings for all individuals entering campus facilities, flexible and remote work schedules, mandatory masking and social distancing, and increased use of telemedicine.

Laboratory experiences in the Biotechnology Master's Degree Program have and will continue to be conducted with social distancing and masking required within the laboratories. In the School of Community and Rural Health, course instruction will use a hybrid format with heavy utilization of online platforms; when physical meetings are warranted by primary learning objectives, classroom and other meeting space will be limited to 30% occupancy to ensure social distancing. All who enter the School building are required to have their temperatures checked and to be masked while in public areas, including classrooms and rest areas. The Dean's Office staff, in coordination with the Chair of Occupational and Environmental Health Sciences, daily monitor social load (maintaining 30% occupancy or less in each room and floor of the building).

2. What plans are in place for on-campus COVID-19 testing? Do institutions have the capacity to provide testing on campus, both in terms of available supplies and labs to process tests?

Due to the uniquely small size and nature of the UTHSCT graduate-only, non-resident student body, there are no current plans for regular on campus testing except as indicated as part of a contact investigation. As a large-scale health institution, UTHSCT will have the capacity to administer and process tests should the need arise.

4. What do projected enrollment figures look like to institutions for this school year?

- **School of Medical Biological Sciences** - Nine new first-year biotechnology students have been enrolled, which is slightly lower than years prior. Several others who have been admitted have had to defer matriculation due to immigration restrictions.
- **School of Community and Rural Health** - Approximately 30 new students were scheduled for new student orientation to begin coursework in either the Master of Public Health or Master of Health Administration programs. This number is 20-25% less than expected. It is estimated the pandemic played a key role in reduced student matriculation.

5. Has there been a noticeable impact on staff or faculty retention with regard to concerns about the pandemic?

UTHSCT Deans have conducted regular meetings via online platforms with faculty and staff to openly discuss the scope of the pandemic, measures to mitigate the risk of infection and to assess morale and well-being. Information has been shared with all members of the UTHSCT community as to how to engage in daily self-screening, and how to access Occupational Health and other healthcare options offered by the university, including behavioral health counseling. These regular meetings also serve to ensure that high-quality research and faculty collaboration continues. UTHSCT is proud to report that, with added projects and efforts to support the community pandemic response, our faculty continue to perform at a high level, even with most team members working remotely.

Recruitment of research faculty has been delayed due to travel restrictions and mandates for quarantine that exist at UTHSCT and the candidates' institutions, however UTHSCT has successfully interviewed and hired multiple faculty through entirely online processes during this period of social distancing.

6. Health-Related Institutions were exempt from the 5% budget cuts earlier this year, due to their important role in resolving the public health crisis. What are some of the programs, research, and responses to the pandemic that our Health Related Institutions have contributed?

UTHSCT researchers have received several new federal grants related to COVID-19.

- A team of UTHSCT physicians is testing the use of convalescent plasma in COVID-19 patients who are hospitalized. The researchers received over \$2 million out of an \$8 million National Institutes of Health (NIH) grant, with other study sites in Houston, New York, and Miami.
- Researchers are working in conjunction with colleagues from across the UT System to conduct another NIH-funded project to establish an Electronic Medical Records data warehousing operation to enable follow up of COVID-19 patients in East Texas, Houston and the Rio Grande Valley.
- Additional new grants from NIH have been obtained for the study of COVID-19 related topics, particularly related to the prevention and treatment of lung scarring in COVID-19 patients, building on decades of similar research at UTHSCT.

The UTHSCT School of Community and Rural Health has contributed, and continues to contribute, to the pandemic effort through multiple avenues.

- In a project designed and led by resident physicians from the UTHSCT Occupational Health Graduate Medical Education Program, staff and volunteers retrofit over 80,000 N95 respirators that had become unusable due to age. Once refurbished, the respirators were used in UTHSCT clinics and were distributed to community clinics unable to obtain necessary PPE.

- In conjunction with the local health department, faculty of the school produced a collaborative medical surge capacity model for the region, designed and publish a daily integrated health system dashboard specifically for COVID-19, built an online contract tracing course to train local contact tracers, developed and published several online/social media health public service announcements pertaining to the pandemic, conducted site visits to health and dental clinics to ensure a safe environment for patients and staff during this crisis.

Jeffrey L. Levin, MD, Provost-*Emeritus* of UTHSCT has served as the Smith County Local Health Authority (LHA) throughout the pandemic. His role required daily meetings with the Tyler mayor and city council, and the Smith County Judge and Commissioner's Court. Additionally, the LHA has been integrally involved with COVID-19 management activities with the Northeast Texas Public Health District. The Public Health Laboratory of East Texas (PHLET), a Laboratory Reference Network (LRN) facility administered by UTHSCT, has played a pivotal role in assisting our healthcare facilities and communities in the provision of lab testing for COVID-19. PHLET has provided area providers with guidelines for effective COVID testing and has processed thousands of samples from the East Texas region. Efforts are underway to increase capacity for laboratory testing in the future.

The pandemic has also led to the enhanced provision of telehealth services at UTHSCT. This accelerated platform has enabled our providers to conduct virtual visits with patients in the convenience of their homes, preventing potential exposure to COVID-19. This platform will most likely continue in earnest after the pandemic has waned.

UTHSCT has also partnered with the Center for Clinical and Translational Sciences in Houston in applying for the NIH Rapid Acceleration of Diagnostics for Underserved Populations (RADx-UP) grant. RADx-UP is focused on understanding and addressing COVID-19 morbidity and mortality disparities among underserved and vulnerable populations in East Texas and across the United States by implementing testing programs that will overcome barriers to and increase uptake of testing in these populations. The university also is partnering with the Northeast Texas Public Health District and the UT School of Public Health in Houston to provide enhanced COVID informatics to display area COVID-19 cases and identify "hot spots" to allow for rapid response activities.

Lastly, UTHSCT staff have created PSAs regarding how the disease is spread and the promotion of preventive activities.

7. How have state and federal COVID-related funds already impacted budgets?

State and federal COVID-related funds have been vital in assisting UTHSCT to absorb both the additional costs and lost net revenue associated with the pandemic. Specifically, UTHSCT has benefited from federal CARES Act funding, directly via the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education, as well as indirectly via funds passed through the Texas Hospital Association Foundation and the Texas Department of Emergency Management to Smith County, Texas.

UTHSCT has used these funds to help with the additional costs of:

- Caring for patients with a COVID-19 diagnosis
- Protecting employees and staff through the purchase of additional personal protective equipment
- Serving the community through testing in our public health lab; and
- Providing emergency funds for our students

8. How has the pandemic affected the overall financial status of small and rural community colleges?

N/A

9. Does your institution have a public, online dashboard for the reporting of positive COVID-19 cases which is updated daily? If so, what is the link to the dashboard?

UTHSCT does not currently maintain a public, online dashboard of this type.